

"Only Visiting This Planet" (album)—Larry Norman (1972)

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Essay by David W. Stowe (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Larry Norman

Contemporary Christian Music, or CCM, might be American pop music's least respected genre, with disco a close second. Both styles came of age at roughly the same time (as did punk rock, interestingly), in what someone called that "armpit of a decade," the Seventies. Unlike CCM, though, and while its stock has gone up, disco remains frozen in time, a historic artifact trapped forever in the years of President Jimmy Carter. CCM has continued to evolve musically and expand commercially.

Larry Norman is often regarded as the patriarch of Christian rock. What does it mean to be the Elvis of a genre that gets so little respect?

The best place to start would be his second album, and his best, "Only Visiting This Planet," released in 1972. The first song, "I've Got to Learn to Live Without You," begins with piano chords reminiscent of the Beatles' "Hey Jude." Recorded at George Martin's AIR studio in London, where Norman moved in 1971, the album was released by MGM. It featured a stable of crack studio musicians, including John Wetton of King Crimson.

Probably the album's best known song is the shuffle-boogie anthem "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?," a catchy manifesto for Christian rock with a title often attributed to Martin Luther. "I ain't knockin' the hymns," Norman sings, "just give me a song that moves my feet. I don't like none of them funeral marches." Norman was articulating a widespread sentiment, then and now. But most of album vents the social discontent of the End Times, Sixties-style.

Norman had grown up in San Francisco, wore his hair really long, and rode a motorcycle --but otherwise he was straight as a ruler. No acid, no dope, no ardent hippie chicks. Born in Texas in 1947, Norman retained a slight southern twang in his voice despite moving to the Bay Area at age three. Two years later he accepted Jesus as his personal

lord and savior, the first of several conversions he would have; he also began writing songs; at age nine he was performing his songs in public.

The oldest of four, he grew up in a black neighborhood a few blocks away from the famous intersection of Haight and Ashbury streets. Norman's grandfather had been a vaudeville actor, often performing Shakespeare; his aunt toured the nightclub circuit with her own baby grand piano. Norman's father taught high school history, but at age ten he had played harmonica on his own radio show, accompanying his guitar-playing father.

When he reached age ten, Larry began delivering newspapers for his grandfather in the Pacific Railroad hospital, 500 papers a day. He loved to play his grandfather's old 78s, including classics by Bert Williams, an African-American vaudeville singer who would remain Norman's favorite. He also listened to Ethel Waters, Mahalia Jackson, and jazz trumpeter Lee Morgan.

"I don't actually sing rock 'n' roll," Norman said. "I sing black music, but I'm white." As much as anyone else in the Sixties pop world, and more than most, he marched to his own drummer. Musically speaking, Norman was a true prodigy. He heard music everywhere; he visualized it as patterns and shapes. Reportedly he never learned to read or write music. Depending on the song, his voice could take on various colorations, from Neil Young to Mick Jagger.

In 1966, Norman helped found a band called People! The group was signed by Capitol, the record label that recorded the pre-Apple Beatles as well as the Beach Boys. To have a contract with Capitol in the late Sixties was a big deal. People! never established itself as a top act, but it was successful enough to tour widely and play as the opening act for the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, Janis Joplin, The Byrds, The Dave Clark Five, and others. This gave Norman a window into the insecurity and emptiness that often haunted the bigger stars of the pop world.

"One night I was singing on stage," Norman recalled, "and Janis Joplin was sitting behind the front curtain watching the concert with a bottle of Southern Comfort in one hand and she was sipping whiskey from a paper cup. She was drunk and really unhappy. And every now and then, she would start yelling at me. I wrote 'Why Don't You Look Into Jesus' about Janis." That song appeared on "Only Visiting This Planet."

"She was like the happy drunk hippie who felt very ugly because of her terrible pockmarks," Norman told me. "And so if you talked to her she'd go, 'Hey, baby, how's it doin?'" And if you talked to her serious, if you say something like 'Jesus--Yeah, Jesus, he's cool, and Muhammad, and Buddha, and...you know?' She was just nonstop. Insecure and on display and performing. You couldn't give to her 'cause she was too busy protecting herself and giving her image back to you. I prayed for a lot of these people, and then was just so brokenhearted when various ones of them began to die."

In "Why Don't You Look Into Jesus," Norman blasts the empty hedonism of the rock stars for whom he opened. "Sipping whiskey from a paper cup," "shooting junk until

you're half insane," "gonorrhea on Valentine's Day and you're still looking for the perfect lay." Another track, "The Outlaw" presents the various sides of Jesus: "Some say he was an outlaw," "a poet," "a sorcerer," "a politician." "He conjured wine at weddings and did tricks with fish and bread." "Some say He was the son of God, a man above all men." This is Norman's belief, "and I think we should get ready 'cause it's time for us to leave."

"I Am the Six O'Clock News" takes on the indifference of network news industry amid the Vietnam War. A journalist packages full-color images of horror from Southeast Asia while living in "a suite at the Saigon Hilton," "drinking black market booze," and attending "cocktail parties with Premier Ky." The song deplors a business that profits from "color movies of misery... I see the flash of guns, how red the mud becomes." It ends with Norman repeating "cbs abc nbc" over the sounds of combat, followed by in-flight announcements. In other songs, Norman levels a scorching jeremiad against America for a litany of social sins: racism, hypocrisy, assassinations, bias toward the rich, and the misguided space race.

The album's most ambitious song, "The Great American Novel," blasts a country that has "poured its love out on the moon," "murdered law," "learned to make a lie sound just like the truth," lynched black men "just for talking to your daughter," then took their wives as mistresses. The song "Reader's Digest" skewers rock 'n' roll: "Alice is a drag queen/Bowie's somewhere in between" while: the Rolling Stones have become millionaires; the Beatles preached love but broke up bitterly; Hendrix and Joplin died of drug overdoses; and Jesus has become a "superstar."

The song continues: "The man on the news said China's gonna beat us, we shot all our dreamers and there's no one left to lead us." The US responds by sending astronauts to the moon. "They brought back a big bag of rocks only cost 13 billion; must be nice rocks!"

It's not hard to hear Bob Dylan's "Subterrean Homesick Blues" in Norman's rapping vocal delivery. But his song "Without Love You are Nothing (Righteous Rocker #1)" sounds for all the world like a rough draft for Dylan's born-again era hit "Gotta Serve Somebody," which won a Grammy in 1980. Norman sings: "You can be a brilliant surgeon/or a sweet young virgin/or a harlot out to sell/or you can learn to play the blues or be Howard Hughes/or the scarlet pimpernal...but without love you ain't nothing."

Partly because of Capitol's meddling (they had meddled with the Beatles as well), and partly because of tensions within the band (some had embraced Scientology), Norman quit People! the day their album hit the record stores in 1968. Then commenced a period of drift. He had a powerful Christian reconversion experience and considered joining Youth for Christ. Capitol invited him back to write musicals for the label. Norman auditioned for and won the lead part in "Hair" (which he turned down) and in 1969 recorded what many consider the first Christian rock album, "Upon This Rock." All the while doing a lot of street evangelism among the colorful characters on Hollywood Boulevard.

“I wasn’t part of the Jesus Movement,” Norman insists. “I had actually been a Christian since I was five, and was already street witnessing just at my little school with my friends. And then later on, on the streets of whatever town I was giving concerts in. Not to promote the concert; I never told anyone my name was Larry Norman. I just started talking to people who I felt God led me to. And God would usually reveal to me what their problem was. And it was never wrong.”

Norman’s definitive capsule summary of End Times theology and maybe his best-known song is “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” (A different version appeared earlier on “Upon This Rock.”) Norman paints a chilling picture of a world wracked by war and suffering, alternating with the mysterious disappearances of the Rapture. A couple lying in bed together, and the husband vanishes; friends walking together until one disappears:

*Life was filled with guns and war
And everyone got trampled on the floor
I wish we’d all been ready
Children died, the days grew cold
A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold
I wish we’d all been ready*

Norman wrote the song while living in LA, witnessing on the street, waiting for God’s call. “It was a beautiful time of my life because it was just me and Jesus,” Norman says. “And I had to depend on him, which I wanted to, because nothing else was happening. I wasn’t performing, I’d given up music. Cause I wanted to be pure. And I slept on the hard floor because I wanted to be like a Spartan. I was actually preparing myself for the end of the world. When that came, if I was still alive, I wanted to be tough enough to survive all the torture. I had to go the dentist so I went and told him, no novocaine. I just did everything I could to abuse my pain threshold thinking that I had to prepare myself as a sacrifice—that I’m not gonna deny Christ.”

Years later in Italy, Norman told me, he was invited to a Bible study by “a Mafia chieftain’s daughter” who’d seen her father murdered; they played Norman the song in Italian. “How did you know that I wrote that song?” he asked the woman. “You didn’t write that song,” she replied. “That’s a folk song. It’s been around for centuries.”

After suffering for decades from a multitude of health problems, Norman died of heart failure on February 24, 2008. He was 60. “Only Visiting This Planet” was ranked number two in “CCM” magazine’s 100 Greatest Albums in Christian Music, behind Amy Grant’s “Lead Me On” (1988).

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.